



From the first murmurs of 1894, to the Great Unrest of 1911 and the punchy Direct Action Movement of the '80s and '90s, this in-brief pamphlet follows the thread of libertarian union organising in Britain.

Picture: Strikers on Llanelli Railway, 1911

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM IN BRITAIN

Solidarity Federation

a little
history

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❖ 19th century to 1914 ❖

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Anarcho-syndicalism is a distinct school of thought within anarchism. It seeks to abolish the wage system and private ownership of the means of production which lead to the class divisions in society.

The three important principles of anarcho-syndicalism are solidarity, direct action and workers' self-management.

It focuses on the labour movement more than other forms of anarchism and looks to unions as a potential force for revolutionary social change, replacing capitalism and the State with a new democratically self-managed society.

The origins of anarcho-syndicalism can be traced back to the First International, also known as the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), formed in 1864. The First International was a socialist organisation which aimed at uniting a variety of different left-wing political groups and trade unions that were based on the working class and class struggle. Anarcho-syndicalism was a development of the social aspirations most strongly held by the libertarian or anarchist wing.

After a period of repression following the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the fall of the International in 1876-7 there was a move by some anarchists towards propaganda by deed to bring about change.

At the same time Marxist political parties settled into a crude determinism that saw them simply waiting

for capitalism to collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions.

Many anarchists though saw the futility of individual action that had alienated them from the working class and sought to re-enter and influence a re-emerging labour movement.

These syndicalists were industrial activists, ordinary workers concerned with the day-to-day problems that confronted them. Syndicalism was not the creation of one particular writer, or group of writers, rather it was the name given to the practice of a group of social movements that emerged, in many parts of the world, between the 1890s and the 1920s.

All of these movements, “revolutionary syndicalist”, “anarcho-syndicalist” or “industrial unionist,” had a common aim, the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism based on economic organisation and using direct, as opposed to political (electoral) action. They sought to establish a new social order, free from economic and political oppression. This, they believed, would only be achieved by action from below, so they discarded notions of capturing state power through parliamentary or revolutionary means.

They rejected the idea of “theorising” as an abstract exercise. They did however develop a theory of syndicalism in another way, which was through the experience and practice of the workers under capitalism.

This was an important aspect of syndicalist thought. The workers through their own experiences saw the true nature of capitalist society; that it is divided into

two naturally antagonistic camps constituting class struggle.

Syndicalists believed that any overlapping between the classes must be prevented; that the working class must become sufficient unto itself. This characteristic has been called “ouvrierism” — coming from the French word for “workers,” which can be described as the rejection of intervention by outside “experts” and parliamentary intermediaries within the socialist struggle, and an exclusive reliance on mass working class experience and action. This is why the syndicalists saw the revolutionary union as the form of organisation to achieve change.

The union should be, unlike the political party, wholly working class in character. It unites workers in their very quality as workers. Syndicalists took literally the slogan of the First International; “the emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves” seeing, in the strike, the means to achieve this.

Every strike, whether successful or not, was seen to increase hostility between the classes and so stimulating further conflict. Strikes encourage feelings of solidarity and are a training ground for further struggles. The climax would be, after a long series of strikes growing in breadth and intensity, the revolutionary general strike.

The anarcho-syndicalists also saw the need to combine the political and the economic struggle into one. They rejected pure economic organisation and

insisted that the revolutionary union should have a clear political goal, the overthrow of capitalism and the state.

The anarcho-syndicalists saw themselves as presenting a consistent programme of action. The strike, the natural form of conflict, was also the form of revolution.

The union, the natural formation for battle in the class struggle, was also the core of the new society. Every strike was a step on the way to the final conflict; while the class war is waged, the future is being created.

Anarchists realised they could not wait for the workers to come to them but had to go out into the labour movement themselves and take an active part in unions and in their affairs and participate in all strikes and agitations.

Anarcho-syndicalism is often presented by many historians as a foreign idea that has no place within the working class movement. While syndicalism attained its first manifestation in France with the founding of the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) in 1895, similar ideas were spreading in Britain which paralleled the French development.

These ideas were taken up as early as 1894. An anarchist monthly, *The Torch*, was arguing against “plots and conspiracies” and that “spontaneous insurrection was an impossible event” calling instead for a general strike encompassing all workers.

In parallel, weekly anarchist paper *Commonweal*, run by former Socialist League members, had urged direct

action by miners during their strike in 1893 — and during 1894 it became increasingly concerned with tactics for the labour struggle.

Criticisms were made of unions which it said were either too small to be effective or too big, with apathy in the branches and “uncontrolled officialism.”

There was also fierce criticism of the Social Democrats who captured positions in the unions and then used them as a base for their political career. It was argued that they undermined the ability of the union to fight.

In 1902, after the end of the Boer War, propaganda activities increased and in London Sam Mainwaring, an anarchist veteran of the Socialist League published the pamphlet *General Strike*. In it he used his experience as a member of the London Trades Council to denounce trade union bureaucracies.

In 1907 John Turner, a trade union activist with the Amalgamated Shop Assistants Union, launched the *Voice of Labour* as a weekly. It was to be used as a base around which to organise “Direct actionist and anarchist groups” and its policy was outlined in the first issues:

“The Voice of Labour advocates Direct Action, the General Strike. Direct Action may be defined as that means of gaining an end which relies on its own power and organisation instead of the state. The General Strike is one great means to this end.

The Voice of Labour, February 9th, 1907

The paper argued for revolutionary propaganda within existing unions as a way of promoting industrial unions and of overcoming divisions — based on different trades — within workers' organisations.

In Britain the progress of anarcho-syndicalism took a different course compared to continental Europe due to the development of British trade unionism, which predated both anarchism and Marxism.

Britain was the first industrialised nation and it was here that the first working class developed.

As early as 1799 and 1825, Combination Acts were passed to try to prevent the growth of working class organisation.

The first trade union with an explicit aim to overthrow capitalism was created in Britain in 1834. The Grand National Consolidated Trade Union (GNCTU) was formed with the aim of the complete replacement of capitalism and the system of competition with a co-operative system based on workers' control.

The GNCTU also developed the earliest incarnation of the social general strike — a “Grand National Holiday.” The idea was that on a set day all the workers would put on their Sunday best and cease work. This would bring the capitalist system to a halt and enable the working class to gain control.

The Grand National eventually collapsed before it could attempt to put its plans into action but its ideas were carried on within the union movement.

Many working class activists within the Chartist movement (1836-48) saw the weapon of strike action

as a way of gaining political change, some even argued for a “Parliament of Industry” to replace the House of Commons.

So the basic ideas of anarcho-syndicalism can be seen as a definite trend and by the beginning of the 20th century its activists were starting to gain ground.

Discontent within the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) was growing due to increasing reformism (the belief that tweaking existing capitalist mechanisms through Parliament is the most best way to build social change) and the neglect of, even hostility to, industrial struggle, of its leaders. Activist workers attacked “opportunistic and chauvinist” backsliding from the controlling group.

They felt their suspicions were confirmed by attempts to unify socialists under the predominantly non-revolutionary Independent Labour Party (ILP) and by qualified support being given to the idea of socialist participation in capitalist governments.

Many working class socialists, contemptuous of the cautious approach of the newly-formed Labour Party and hostile to the SDF, became attracted to the idea of anarcho-syndicalism. It seemed to offer them a way of using workplace organisation to positive effect in the fight against capitalism.

The Labour Representation Committee formed in 1900 and changes its name to the Labour Party in 1906. Many working class activists were disgusted with the performance of the party’s first MPs as well as “top-hatted trade unionists” that ran the unions, supported

Labour and worried about their own social standing rather than the needs of members.

There was a gap between workers and the union bureaucracies. Anarcho-syndicalists worked both within existing unions and in alternative industrial groupings to argue for a new form of union, based on direct action and control by ordinary “rank and file” workers.

An example of this thinking came from famous union leader Tom Mann, who had been an organiser in the 1889 London Dock Strike which effectively established industrial unionism in Britain.

Mann wrote *The Way to Win* in 1909, a pamphlet which argued that socialism could only be achieved through trade unionism and co-operation, suggesting parliamentary democracy was inherently corrupt.

Having met with the French CGT in 1910, he also published *Industrial Syndicalist* to create some sense of co-ordinated syndicalist dialogue. This aim was realised with the establishment of the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL) in December 1910. At its inaugural conference in Manchester many prominent syndicalists were in attendance and notably they included many anarcho-syndicalists.

There were differences between the anarcho-syndicalists and the non-anarchist syndicalists, as well as those who simply preferred to call themselves industrial unionists. The anarcho-syndicalists argued strongly that alternative unions needed to be created, although the majority were opposed to setting these up immediately.

Attempts were made by industrial unionists to set up a union organisation based on the American syndicalist model of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) but these were unsuccessful — the IWW was a response to a particular set of circumstances.

Anarcho-syndicalists called for activists to remain members of existing unions and work within them to push forward syndicalist thinking. They would also work outside the constraints of the union structures to develop ideas and strategies.

They saw a need for workers to organise on industrial (workplace-based) rather than craft (skills-based) lines, and combined this with a very specific approach to power and decision-making. This approach was to keep ordinary workers in control.

These ideas were in keeping with the practices of continental syndicalist movements, especially the Spanish CNT with whom there were many contacts. Anarcho-syndicalism was also developed and strengthened by Jewish immigrants who brought anarchist ideas and applied them to union organising. Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, and especially London's East End had active groups and provided a support base.

ISEL would offer syndicalists a point of reference for the next three years until it was dissolved in 1913. It ended the isolation experienced by syndicalists and helped to spread syndicalist ideas during the labour unrest of the following years.

As industrial conflict grew syndicalism became a national issue.

The period 1910-1914 saw an unprecedented wave of strikes across mines, docks, the transport and building industries, eventually pushing the government to use troops against strikers and sparking a general strike in Liverpool.

In these conflicts initiative was often taken by rank and file workers who often pushed unions at a faster pace than their “leaders” found acceptable. They formed strike committees which took control of the strikes away from union bureaucrats.

The syndicalist influence was felt throughout this time and anarcho-syndicalists were prominent, for example in the Liverpool transports strikes of 1911.

Syndicalists were especially influential on the railways and after the national strike of 1911 quite a number of branches gave active support to syndicalist policies.

In the autumn of 1911 a monthly journal, *Syndicalist Railwayman*, showed the increasing extent of influence in that industry.

One of the main themes in its outreach was an attack on left-wing nationalisation calls. Syndicalist rail workers maintained that it would not greatly improve the lot of the railwaymen.

Real emancipation would only be achieved when railwaymen themselves had control over the industry. And this could be achieved only through industrial unity and “direct action.”

In 1912 the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS) went so far as to declare in favour of the syndicalist demand for workers’ control of industry.



1914 – 1945



The outbreak of World War I saw an end to the early 20th century wave of unrest. One breakaway syndicalist union, the Building Workers' Industrial Union, formed in August 1914, but found its anti-militarism made it a target for the State. The union was quickly suppressed.

During the war many syndicalists became involved in shop stewards and workers' committees that were springing up in defence of workers' rights.

These were especially prominent on Clydeside and in Sheffield and a conference was held in Manchester in 1916. The Shop Stewards and Works Committee Movement (SSWCM) was formed in 1917 as a result.

ASRS also continued to emphasise its sympathies with the syndicalists, and was joined in its calls for workers' control in 1917 by the Nation Union of Railwaymen and Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers. Despite conciliatory noises however the government bogged down negotiations after the war, eventually ditching the idea entirely in 1921.

In the West, the South Wales Reform Committee was strongly influenced by syndicalism, and in its 1912 pamphlet *The Miners' Next Step* had rejected nationalisation in favour of aggressive working action to drive bosses out, with the unions taking over. This was a minority position nationally, and in 1918 the formal position was agreed that "joint control" was the priority.

This tentative by some unions towards more outright syndicalist policies however was brought up short by the beginning of the Russian Revolution in 1917. After years of slow struggle, many syndicalists were overjoyed at the seeming outright success of the Bolshevik model of revolution, joining the newly-formed Communist Party of Great Britain.

Many became disillusioned later with central directives coming out of Moscow and especially the USSR's instructions that they should affiliate to the Labour Party.

After sending delegates to the Second Congress of Soviet-dominated political international the Comintern in 1920, the SSWCM split with a minority rejecting the Bolshevik strategy.

Syndicalism nevertheless fell into decline and by the time of the 1926 General Strike its influence was only felt in a few attempts to create alternative structures under direct worker control.

Instead the Communist Party was to become the dominant political focus for the radical left in Britain, reaching a peak of 60,000 members in 1945.

But interest in anarcho-syndicalism began to revive with the onset of the Spanish Revolution in the 1930s. Famed anarchist firebrand Emma Goldman was in London during this period and wrote extensively about the anarcho-syndicalist CNT's role. Many went to fight.

At the end of the conflict in 1939 many Spanish exiles came to London and helped inspire a number of anarchists who became active during World War II.



At the end of the war the Anarchist Federation of Britain (AFB) was formed and started to produce a magazine, *Direct Action*, from 1945.

Although not specifically an anarcho-syndicalist organisation it was heavily influenced by anarcho-syndicalist ideas and considered joining the International Workers' Association (IWA), the anarcho-syndicalist international.

In 1950 leading lights from the AFB formed the Syndicalist Workers Federation (SWF). The SWF began by attacking the Labour government and its nationalisation proposals.

It also forcefully made the point that, even if nationalisation was extended to all industry, it could only result in state capitalism.

Far from promoting workers' control, it was argued this would allow a new "boss class" to emerge, whose power would result in control over rather than workers' ownership of industry. They argued that workers within the nationalised industries would soon find their conditions and wages lagging behind the private sector.

Instead of supporting nationalisation, they argued, workers should organise on the same basis of class struggle, irrespective of whether the workplace was in state or private ownership.

The SWF attempted to link workplace militancy to a revolutionary perspective and it consistently argued for

independent industry-wide unions to both co-ordinate day to day struggle and pursue the long term aim of replacing capitalism with a society based on direct democracy and workers' control.

It also called for workers to organise internationally, joining the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers' Association (IWA) and playing a role supporting exiled Spanish dissenters against the regime of fascist dictator Francisco Franco.

Eventually, following a Mob beating of key organiser Tom Brown over his role in a community campaign against their brothel activities in Paddington that left him permanently invalided, and collectively exhausted from fighting the dominance of the Communist Party and trade unions, the SWF fell apart. By the mid 1970s it consisted of just one active group in Manchester and a few isolated supporters.

The death of Franco in 1975 however re-energised the Spanish CNT and the IWA more generally.

Manchester Syndicalist Workers Federation joined a number of independent anarchist groups based around *Black Flag* magazine and solidarity groups which had been helping the Spanish resistance to found the Direct Action Movement (DAM) in 1979.

DAM was highly active through the 1980s, particularly during the miners' strike of 1984-85, which followed a decentralised structure and showed the relevance of syndicalist ideas to working class struggle. The excellent work done by DAM members won them the respect of many striking miners.

The middle to late eighties saw DAM throw itself into a number of other disputes, including at Kent Messenger, Silent Night Traders and the printers at Wapping.

In response to a strike at lighting firm Ardbride, DAM members mounted a consumer boycott of Laura Ashley, its chief customer, which was taken up internationally through the IWA. Union bosses called off the strike at a critical moment, losing the organisers their jobs.

The DAM was also involved in a number of campaigns where it had an arguably disproportionate influence to its modest numbers. In the anti-Poll Tax movement (1988-91), the only challenge to takeover attempts by Militant Tendency, a Trotskyite group that had infiltrated the Labour Party, came from the DAM.

DAM played a role in the founding of Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) in 1985, was part of a walkout against the expulsion of anarchist group Class War in 1986 over spurious infiltration claims, and helped re-launch AFA in 1989 on a militant footing after its degeneration and split.

All these experiences led the DAM to develop a new industrial strategy based on direct action, workplace assemblies, and strike committees. The first step was to form “industrial networks” of activists in industries whose long-term aim was to form an anarcho-syndicalist union.

A pamphlet, *Winning the Class War*, was published in 1991 and the continued development of the Industrial Networks led to the creation of the Solidarity Federation (SolFed) in March 1994.



Today's movement



The Solidarity Federation is a federation of groups and individuals across Britain and Ireland. A non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian solidarity movement, it is organised into “Locals,” groups based on geographical area.

Locals put solidarity into practice, organising and getting involved in local campaigns across a wide range of issues, both in the community and in workplaces. Issues are extensive: defending our natural and local environment and health; opposing racism, sexism and homophobia, anything which defends or contributes to our mutual quality of life.

Direct action is the tool Locals use in all their work. At a basic level, this can be simply the spreading of information through leaflets, local bulletins and public meetings to raise awareness and involvement locally.

However, direct action is not limited to spreading information. It means taking action to defend and promote a better quality of life. Fundamental to direct action is the fact that we can only rely on ourselves to achieve our goals.

While we do take opportunities to fight for improvements to our quality of life now, the movement remains independent from all elites. It does not accept leadership, charity, nor guidance from government or business — the principle of solidarity is fixed with the practice of self-reliance.

Solidarity Federation members who work in the same sector form Networks. Their purpose is to promote solidarity amongst workers and encourage direct action in the workplace to fight for better pay and conditions. Networks and individual members work in mainstream unions as well as outside them, trying to form a basis for a completely new labour movement.

As Locals and Networks grow, they practice community and workers' self-management. Eventually industries will be run by producers and consumers — by workers in Networks and members of affected Locals, who want the goods and services they provide.

Capitalism is international, so we need to be organised globally to oppose it and build a viable alternative. Nationalism and patriotism lead to pointless and false divisions, used to justify wars between our rulers. SolFed opposes both in favour of a movement built on global solidarity.

Solidarity Federation is affiliated to the International Workers' Association (IWA). This gives it essential international solidarity and experience from larger sections such as the CNT (Spain) and USI (Italy).

Founded in 1922, the IWA has a long history of solidarity in action; Before World War II, over five million people worldwide were affiliated.

A combination of war, fascism, and Bolshevik "communism" all but destroyed the movement, but after Spain's CNT re-emerged in the late seventies the IWA had a new lease of life. Today there are sections ranging from a few dozen to thousands of members.

Most labour historians have overlooked the influence and importance of anarcho-syndicalism. Its advocates were ordinary workers and industrial activists, concerned with the day-to-day problems that confronted them. They rejected the idea of theorising as an abstract exercise and did not have the time, or the inclination, to write long academic theses or books which have in the recent past been the mainstay of documenting “history.”

Anarcho-syndicalism has appealed both to workers within existing unions and to unskilled, non-unionised sections of the work force. This influence goes beyond traditional limits of labour history which tends to be written around the history of trade unionism and does not deal with the autonomous history of the working class.

Some academics and middle class theorists have attempted to dismiss anarcho-syndicalism as “confused thinking” by some sections of the working class who cannot adapt to change. Others have seen it as a primitive forerunner to a more “coherent” and “sophisticated” form of socialism — Bolshevism.

Syndicalism’s anti-intellectual stance, “ouvrierism,” rejected outside experts and professional politicians in favour of a reliance on mass working class experience and action.

Therefore anarcho-syndicalist history and theory is not to be found in books in libraries but in the pages of its papers and magazines, leaflets and propaganda and in the collective experiences of those who continue to work within its principles.



A brief timeline



1834-1839

Grand National Consolidated Trade Union formed

1864

First International is founded

1871

Paris Commune falls

1876-7

First International falls

1895

French CGT founded

1902

Sam Mainwaring writes *General Strike*

1909

Tom Mann writes *The Way to Win* and *The Industrial Syndicalist*

1911

Syndicalist Railwayman published

1917

Russian Revolution

1920

Second Comintern split

1936-9

Spanish Revolution
WWII

1975

Death of Francisco Franco

1984

Miners Strike

1991

Winning the Class War

1889

Tom Mann leads London dock strike

1893-4

The Torch decries propaganda of the deed, *Commonweal* urges direct action and labour struggle

1907

Launch of *Voice of Labour Weekly*

1910-14

Industrial Syndicalist Education League and *The Great Unrest*

1914-16

Building Workers' Industrial Union, Shop Stewards & Works Committee

1926

General Strike

1950-70s

Syndicalist Workers Federation

1979-1994

Direct Action Movement

1994

Solidarity Federation